Cab Calloway

Mrs. Izzo

English 149

4 May 2009

Comedy Mad 40

*“Comedy, in a sense, is no less serious than tragedy. Where tragedy shows us the god-like qualities of man, comedy shows us his humanity. Tragedy is personal; comedy is social.”*

In The Crucible by Arthur Miller and The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde, the concepts of what is human and what is more than human are contrasted though the authors’ use of setting, characterization, and plot.

In both The Importance of Being Earnest and The Crucible, setting plays an important role in how the main characters are portrayed. While the protagonist of Earnest, Jack Worthing, is portrayed as a very human character, the protagonist of The Crucible, John Proctor, is defined in a much more godlike way. In Earnest, Oscar Wilde uses average, everyday settings for his characters to live in. As a man with a house in both town and country, Worthing is not unusual and is very human. In both places, the man is surrounded by people and has an active social life. By contrast, John Proctor resides in a sheltered New England town, cut off from the rest of the world by eerie forests. The Crucible’s setting yields a more otherworldly type of character, and its isolation makes every one of Proctor’s actions more personal because it affects a smaller group of people. With their use of setting, both authors indicate the contrast between the human aspects of John Worthing’s personality and the unrealistic aspects of John Proctor’s.

In addition to using setting to contrast the human aspects of comedy and the inhuman aspects of tragedy, both authors use characterization to further their messages. Arthur Miller crafts John Proctor’s reaction to the chaotic events around him in an unrealistic manner, indicating the inhuman aspects of the tragedy. Conversely, John Worthing responds to the chaos in his life in a very human manner. Where Proctor fumes, Worthing tries to reason. Where Proctor overreacts, Worthing tries to maintain order and control. Where Proctor sacrifices, Worthing acts out of his own best interest. The two protagonists are so startlingly different that the chasm between their personalities brings forth the divide in the nature of the two plays. Proctor’s character, with his less-than-realistic reaction to stress and drama, is a strong indicator of the largely inhuman nature of a tragic play. On the other hand, Worthing’s character, with his flaws and human emotions, reveals the underlying human nature of a comic play. Both Miller and Wilde use characterization to emphasize this divide between the innate qualities of comic and tragic works.

Along with setting and characterization, both Arthur Miller and Oscar Wilde use specific plot events to indicate the true nature of their style of work. While Miller’s tragedy deals with otherworldly events, Wilde’s comedy is the result of genuinely human actions. The main conflict in The Crucible stems from the topic of witchcraft, and a large portion of the play focuses on the nature of magic and devilry. This suggests a tie between inhuman actions and the nature of tragedy, as the latter is a direct result of the former. Similarly, Wilde makes a connection between his plot and his genre in The Importance of Being Earnest. By crafting his plot in such a way that the conflict and chaos are the result of a simple human mistake, Wilde emphasizes the link between comedy and humanity. Both authors use key plot events in combination with the genre of their writing to reveal the relative humanity or inhumanity of comedy and tragedy.

TIME